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Farmer

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My wife and her father have decided I'm ill. They discuss this at length, I'm certain, though the subject never surfaces in my presence. Instead, once a week, Jeanene fetches me a set of keys for the old Ford pickup and a list of parts that we don't need. This trip is supposed to be therapy. No one ever asks to join me for the ride. When Nan, our daughter, runs to the truck, Jeanene carefully steers her away, as if miles are a medicine best consumed alone, or maybe she just thinks whatever I've got is catching.

I've driven this road for six years now, all except this last one as a whole man. This is my final trip. On the passenger side, a truck carburetor and two spare combine belts rattle. A half empty bourbon pint clanks against the seat belt buckle. In my wallet are seventeen hundred dollar bills, a twenty, and a few ones. The banker's odd look is still with me. He's a friend of my father-in-law. He nosed through my records, trying to find a reason to hold me up as I signed the forms closing the account. He date-stamped the document, still staring. I asked to use the rest room and pissed in his sink.

Upright against the door is a rose starter packed in plastic. Its yellow flower is Nan's favorite. I bought a package of sunshiny bows at the drug store and stuck them to the branches like blossoms. Perhaps she can find a warm window sill and transplant it in the spring. She loves flowers of all kinds. Summers, she dallies in the garden like she's amazed by color itself. Like me, she's stricken with growing things.

Since my childhood, I've been a good hand. My father knew farmers on spreads in the Columbia Basin, and I hired out pulling rye, moving irrigation pipe, and spotting trucks in the field until I was old enough for a farm permit. My sophomore year of high school, I scrounged fall and spring work planting and weeding for a man who had no sons. I was always dirty—gritty in a way that made me feel pleased, even if I was dead-dog tired. My hands were covered with calluses, healing scars, specks of blood and chemical, and good, brown dirt. You could see the work on me.

In college, I met a farm girl from Davenport. After five years of farming summers and finishing my Ag degree winters, my new father-in-law signed over a lease to me on our wedding day. It was one third of his land.

"There's a third for a chance on," he said, "and two thirds left waiting to see."

Two falls ago, I put all the land in winter wheat. I planted early and the snow pack was late. Halloween, an Arctic blast swooped in from the Gulf of Alaska. It killed five hundred acres of ankle-high wheat shoots overnight. I replanted in March but didn't see rain until August. Between freeze damage and drought protection, the crop insurance barely covered seed for the next fall.

Most all the farmers in the county were in the same fix. We sat at the cafe mornings, feed caps shading our brows. Some played cribbage, others fussed over breakdowns and market prices and anyone who might have died in the last week. I read magazines on seed and fertilizer.

"Why doesn't anybody plant Stephens?" I held up an article on record yields from Colfax. "The heads are as big as my thumb."

"Palouse growers can." My father-in-law stabbed his toast in a broken yolk. "Palouse is million dollar country," he said. "You'd think they'd come on to the big river here, but those Germans and Russians were smarter than all us coffee drinkers."

"What's so different about that country?"

He counted on his fingers. "Later winter, earlier spring, June rain four out of five years, no rocks, and better basketball."

"Seventy-five bushels'd cover our losses if things flew right."

He shook his head. "Better to wait."

"If the weather holds, we might not have to."

He chewed then swallowed. "If is the biggest little word in the dictionary."

He'd finished his breakfast. The plate was slicked down to the porcelain. I could see his reflection shine. He found a toothpick and poked at his bridge. Ever since I've known him he's been smarter than me, and I've always been left trying to catch up.

I planted Stephens. Winter held on till May near the river, and snow mold took half the wheat before spring ever commenced. Right after the Fourth of July, I drove the three-wheeler through what was left. The heads had started to droop and there was a stripe of cephalosporium across the stalks. I'd not treated the seed for fungus.

That fall my father-in-law bought his own seed and when I asked him about planting he sent me out to turn the summer fallow where I could do no

harm. I sulked through the winter. Some nights I dreamed of gardens insane and woke up at three in the morning, clammy, heart whomping, arms numb, my mind moving faster than words could track. The town doctor pronounced me healthy. Jeanene's father whispered about the deep end. Spring, he hired a man from town.

I felt smothered in my bed and spent a night on the sofa and then another. Three months now, I've slept there and sat out the days, too, watching the television. Nan ignores me, but Jeanene stares from my old recliner across the room. At first, she seemed amazed that I was there at all, like I might be an unwelcome neighbor person, who just walked in and plopped down on her couch. Lately, I've been more of a study. She touches my shoulder curiously whenever she leaves or enters the room.

Past midnight last night, I woke to her stroking my forehead like I was a feverish child. The TV glow flooded her face with light.

"I love you," she said, "but I hate this." She turned to the TV. "I wish you were dead sometimes." When I didn't move, she bit my collarbone hard, then plunged her thumbs so far into the muscle below I could feel her nails bend against my skin.

"I know you can feel in there."

I nodded.

"If you can't stay, I'll understand," she said. "But, I don't want to remember this."

I watched as she unbuttoned her shirt and loosened the sweatpants I was wearing. Her mouth followed the thin line of hair down my chest. My eyes closed. She slipped over me. I heard her moan, felt her heave and take in the air around me. Her hips slammed against my pelvis again and again, until she finally stopped, exhausted from trying. She rolled onto the floor and lay quiet for a moment. Her eyes closed, and with one finger she tracked through my hair, across my forehead and then my nose. Her nail tapped my front teeth, making little sounds. She drew the C shape of my jaw over and over. When she dropped her hand away, I watched her trace her own face in the same way. Then with both hands, she eased down her shoulders to her breasts. She rubbed the nipples with her palms until they stood. Her hands moved farther, to her hips and thighs, exploring, finding places she'd forgotten about. A wrinkle twisted the edge of her eyelid then disappeared. She was practicing being alone.

She lay there through the night without moving. We never touched, but the TV light flowed over the both of us, like we were pebbles scattered by the

same creek. When we were kids we used to call the static that was left on the screen the ant race. With no sound, it floated over her through the living room's darkness.

Before dawn, I dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, and went to watch Nan sleep. Her room had been my office once. The desk had nearly disappeared under a growing family of stuffed animals that, without color, looked like conspiring goblins. Until a few months ago, I'd started each morning of her life in this old rocker wearing these worn clothes, the first thing she saw.

Through the window, the fields in the east appeared as if by magic. Nan turned and buried her face in her pillow. A row of outdated encyclopedias lined the bookcase, and I opened one. The map in the front cover was of another world. Countries had moved or vanished. Inside was a photograph of a young girl burned by napalm, naked, stumbling like a stunned pony. I'd read she was in the States now attending graduate school. But somewhere she was fourteen and in pain forever.

When I leave the bank, passing cars have gone to their headlights. A line of clouds drapes the sky near black. Steady rain rattles the cab before I'm to the truck, and the worn wipers leave a streak on the window with each pass as I head home for my things.

I remember dry months praying for this kind of weather, honest-to-God-get-down-on-your-knees-and-call-Christ-by-his-first-name prayers. And I wasn't the only one. Jeanene scanned the evening skies for any cloud that might have a little gray to it. When a thunder clap woke us, or that musty closet smell caught the wind, it was more than rain, more even than good luck, it was a reward for being right with your life. A person driving by on rainy nights found most couples on the porch, arms round one another, gazing at the rain gauge, listening to the sound of water on the roof, the metal of the shed and cars, and God's own firmament until the evening was late enough for the kids to be all the way asleep. Jeanene and I would close Nan's windows and stroke her cool forehead. Later, we'd warm our own bedroom, undoing each other's night clothes, in no hurry, seeing as no one worked the day after a good rain anyhow.

By what's standing on the highway, we've got a half inch with no let up which means another half or maybe more before the storm plays out. A mile up, a truck eases triangle-stacked seed drills onto the pavement. Old Hubble in the cab smiles, congratulating himself on his timing. My father-in-law says,

"A farmer who don't grin in the rain, don't grin ever." The next morning will be big business at the cafe. He'll be over a four egg omelet and coffee all morning.

I'm nearly to the county turn when I spot the white light flooding cock-eyed into the sky. Angelic and strange, it glimmers like movie religion. I blink my eyes and pull at the whiskey again. Closer, the glow throbs and trembles. Gravel fans through the far side of the unbanked corner and tire marks black the pavement. A car lies in the wheat, upside down on the ditch bank. In my headlights, gouged sod droops off the rear fender. A shattered fence post has splintered the front window, and barbed wire is twisted around the antenna and grill workings.

The wreck is still warm, the smell of heat and oil heavy through the softening rain. A boy labors out the driver's side. One useless arm hangs from his shirt. The other touches his forehead and checks for blood. From behind, a second set of headlights throws long shadows and silhouettes that jump in what's left of the dusk.

"You okay?" I ask the boy.

"My sister." His hair is pasted to his head and his soaked shirt hangs like houndskin. He looks back toward the car and coughs with fear. Through the cracked window, a body quivers in the passenger seat. "Do something," he yells.

A man jogs to us on the gravel shoulder. He breathes ragged breaths. He's heavy, sloppy fat. His shirt rides up his belly showing hair and flesh. Long sideburns cut straight at his jaw, and he wears his hair greased and slicked over. We all call him Elvis.

"His sister's in the car."

Elvis squints into the rain. "What're you doing out here then?"

"I just got here."

Elvis climbs through the driver's window head-first. His belly pinches against the door. The boy glances toward me, then takes a few steps to the wreck. His good hand opens and closes, reaching both directions, to me, to the car. His face flattens in the light; his eyes wander, trying to focus. He finally inches up to the window and speaks to Elvis's back. "Can I help?" Elvis shakes his head, but the boy asks again, louder.

"Clean up the glass," Elvis says. "Get it off the road."

The boy sits in front of the torn bumper where he plucks tiny shards of glass from the gravel. He studies each piece for a moment before he searches

for another. He's oblivious to the line of water trickling down his back. "Careful," he repeats. The glass flickers like diamonds in the light.

"Hey," Elvis shouts from inside the car. The boy jerks to his haunches. "Not you. Him."

The girl still reclines in the seat, her body against the door panel, Elvis's knees on each side of her slim waist. "I need something to stop the bleeding," he says. "Hand me your shirt. Mine's covered with grease."

He wrings my shirt then presses it against the girl's neck. "She's bleeding like a cut hog," he says. "Someone better go for the doctor."

"Do you want me to?"

Elvis sniffs at the liquor on me. He looks filmy like the gas and oil from the station where he works. His free hand traces his unshaven jaw below those ridiculous sideburns. "No, I better. You'll have to hold this. The boy doesn't look to be good for much."

"Why don't we both go?"

"Leave the boy here?" Elvis asks.

"Haul him, too. Go get an ambulance."

"She'll die."

"I don't want to be here when she does. I can't hack that, I don't think."

Elvis tries the door handle, then lifts himself through the window. He looks me over, shaming me till I drop into the car.

"Ain't nothing to it. Just push down on the shirt."

Elvis's car beams arch over the pasture behind us, then disappear. The shirt is already sticky, the cut a meaty slice above it. I dig the heel of my palm in. The girl's neck gives and the cut gapes open. Hazy warmth rises from her, almost steam. Her blood warms my hands and slides through my fingers. After we married, Jeanene took a job at the grocery store in town. I would watch the traffic move by on our road, waiting for her, feeling an eerie loneliness each time lights passed and broke out of sight. I counted the cars and listened to the clock and imagined her not coming home at all, veering the wrong direction, or alone in some twisted car on the highway. I prepared for her death, thinking out each step of my mourning, walking through the house, standing in the bare light, exploring the cold rooms without her. Finally, her car would slow at our corner, the lights bouncing up once at the bump by the mailbox. The motor ticked as her steps rattled across the sidewalk to the front door. I made her quit that job.

The rustling of glass in the boy's hands sounds like wind. "He says, "Let me help."

"Give me your shirt."

He unbuttons the shirt then tugs off his T-shirt underneath and drops it to me. He winces with pain. Midway, his forearm bone has changed direction.

I shove the old shirt in back. The wound is huge, a straight glass cut that the meat of the girl's neck tries to close. A broken artery jumps and separates. Blood pulses outside the gash, less than before. Her stomach cavity gives easily. I lean as hard as I can against the fresh shirt. The boy watches. "Please, God," he pleads.

"You can't do anything praying," I tell him. "It's bad luck, that's all."

He looks at me oddly, his head cocks as if I'm saying some truth he wants to hear more of. He wags his jaw at me, considering, then climbs down through the window to the back seat.

"She's my little sister," he says.

"I'm sorry. Pray if you want."

"It's just I never liked her much till now."

From behind the girl, he stretches past the headrest and combs her hair away from her cuts. The shadow of his hand lingers over her face. When it draws away, the girl looks like she's only sleeping. "It's going to be okay," the boy tells me.

Her chest has stopped rising.

"Damn this cut." I start in. Two breaths and twenty CPR repetitions. She bounces under the heel of my hand.

The boy says, "Never should've drove today. Never. Rain. It don't ever come when you want it." The window is covered with it, rivulets racing across the cracked glass. It looks like the static I wake to every night, all hiss and lines heading nowhere at all. Even if a person turns off the TV or finds a late movie, it is still waiting, like blood going round and round to no place till you spring a leak.

The girl's chest stays still, but her eyes open and she blinks at me. Two fingers on her hand quiver. Her mouth looks like it's smiling. The boy's shirt has soaked up the blood, and I can't really feel a pulse anymore.

"Cindy." The boy chants. "Cindy, Cindy."

I lift the shirt and press my fingers inside the wound. The artery feels slack and rubbery. It's strings of flop, but I try to roll the tube together, to make it work a while. Blood flexes into the vessel and some splatters up my wrist. The rest slips through underneath my thumb and forefinger. I feel it passing, forcing itself to the right places. The ribs of the girl's trachea flutter and the thin strip of muscle parts and opens up for me. She breathes.

"Again," the boy whispers. "Do it again."

When the ambulance stops, Elvis and the doctor wave me out and hoist the girl from the car. "I'll sew her on the way," the doctor tells the driver.

The county deputy and the ambulance attendant load her. Their movements are slow in the pulsing strobe. The boy rakes his hand through the girl's hair one more time outside the car.

"Doc?" I ask.

His hand is inside her thigh. His lips count. It's a long time between numbers.

The door shuts, and the ambulance eases out of the gravel. The siren whirs, then catches. Elvis holds his arms up in the car's light. They're streaked with blood, and so are mine. "We saved her," Elvis says. He slaps my bare back like we're friends.

"I don't think so."

"We saved her damnit. We did it."

"She's dead," I tell him.

Elvis's eyes are bloodshot and wild. I watch him turn, then walk away. The wreck and I are the only things left. Crumpled metal lies in the ditch and wheel rods hang helpless at the shell, disconnected from the axle. Elvis is at his car when I shout: "Okay. We saved her. We did."

The window is down. Air whistles through me, and I go numb in the cold. The stars shine and the moon reflects on the broad turn of the river. The radio is off, and there's only the tires on the road and the dark sky sliding past. The fresh turned dirt smells thick with rain and growing.

I set the rose on the porch steps to let it soak. The windows of the house are dark, but inside, it smells clean and faintly like baby powder. I nearly stumble into my bedroom dresser. A small wicker basket on top spills a pocket watch and a silver dollar my father gave me when I graduated high school.

"Washington hucked one of these across the Potomac," he said. I sit on the floor, absently contemplating the weight of the coin and the width of the river, rolling it over and over across my knuckles until Nan startles me.

She shifts from one foot to the other, peering at the suitcase in the closet I'd readied this morning. The dresser drawers are ajar. She opens one and begins unloading what I've packed, stacking neatly underwear, socks, and the rest. When that drawer is not enough she starts on the next. She is sure and full of the grace that goes with good work. Her straight mouth is all business.

Her eyes are blue and vacant. In my coat pocket the emptied savings is clumped for her and her mother, except the hundred in my jeans for traveling. But all she knows about it is that clothes belong in drawers.

Light from the window floats over Jeanene's pillow. She turns. I hear her breathing, then myself. Underneath the comforter and sheets, her leg and shoulder are blue in the moonlight. She smells dry as summer dust. Nan climbs in.

Jeanene peeks around her. "I was worried," she says.

I wait for some sign from my arms and legs, some signal to go on. I try to remember my life before this moment. The suitcase on the floor is a square hole, the unclosed lid gaping.

"You want to get under the covers?" Jeanene whispers.

I undress. My daughter shivers against my cold skin but digs in all the same. My hand on her back floats.

Jeanene touches my wrist with her finger. She nods at the opened bag. "Are you going?"

"No," I tell her. She holds my hand. I say the word again.

"Shh," Jeanene whispers, but I carry on, to myself. I repeat the word until Jeanene and Nan fall into the steady buzz of sleep, until their lungs take in the air around me and then reassure me with its return, until the clatter of rain on the roof softens to an easy hum, until I make it truth.